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## ABSTRACT

Students need to be made comfortable with the "foreign" language of British English before they can fathom the range of and changes in English literature through the centuries. In one approach to college English, students spend most of the first semester studying nineteenth century novels. After having studied four such novels, each for between two and four weeks, students have acquired a confidence in their abilities to read and analyze the literature of another country. During the second semester, therefore, the students are able to survey an expanse of English poetry that previously would have crushed them under its metaphorical weight. Rather than having students study the poetry en masse, certain poems are selected and collected into six short units, chronologically ordered. From there the students move into plays or short novels. In this way, they focus not on chronology, not on themes, but on the works themselves. By the time the students reach twentieth century literature, they can better appreciate it because they understand what precedes it. (A sequence of literature for a college English course is appended.) (HOD)

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BEOWULF DEBUNKED: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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## "BEOWULF DEBUNKED: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO ENGLISH LITERATURE"

by Allan J. Ruter

a presentation at the 1983 Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Seattle, Washington

Here I present an assumption, a theory, and the teaching method that they have spawned.

### I. An Assumption

"Things must fit," I say. I have little patience for those esteemed colleagues of mine who moan, come May each year, that they don't have time to teach a particular literary work because they have taken too much time on other works. My rule of thumb is this: "However much time you would like to spend on a piece of literature, spend at least one day less." Pacing is absolutely crucial to teaching that challenges and disciplines students. A healthy pacing is particularly important to subject matter so traditionally stale to students as English literature.

### II. A Theory

English literature is initially a mystery to many--I think most--capable college-bound high school students. Befuddled by its subjects, settings, and styles, they find their understanding and interest blocked by what they see as literary and linguistic "secrets"--extensive allusions (geographical, historical, and mythological), dialects difficult to read much less understand, a class consciousness that infests the lives and ideas of so many writers and their characters, and more.

A chronological approach to English literature can be dangerous both for students and for their teachers if it is used indiscriminately. It presupposes that students can appreciate the subtle linguistic, thematic, and metaphorical changes from decade to decade. Most of them can't, I think.

We need to focus more not on chronology, not on themes, but on the works themselves. We need to make students feel comfortable with the "foreign" language of British English before they can begin to fathom the range of and changes in English literature through the centuries.

### III. The Method

Students in my "College English" course spend most of the first semester studying nineteenth century novels--works that still prove remarkably well that English literature is not only accessible but also lively for teenagers in the 1980's. The length and form of the novel make it by far the most desirable introduction to English literature, because a novel not only requires students to invest time in it, it rewards them for time spent with a more realistic portrayal of life than other literary genres are likely to give them. (Another very real bonus to reading these novels is that they are wonderful vocabulary builders.)

After they have tucked four novels under their belts, each of which takes between two and four weeks to study, my students have a much-bolstered confidence in their abilities to read and analyze the literature of another country.

During the second semester, therefore, we are able to survey an expanse of English poetry that previously would have crushed them under its metaphorical weight. But even though the wonderful body of English poetry can be studied en masse, I do not do it. I have personally selected poems and collected them into six short units, chronologically ordered; I teach no more than two of these units in a row before shifting gears to teach a play or short novel.

As the year progresses and we dabble with Austen and Conrad, Shakespeare and Stoppard, Milton and Eliot (George and T. S.), I notice a real rise in understanding, appreciation, and sophistication among my students. Of course, I am not fool enough to presume that I inspire all of it, or even much of it. Some of it, yes: I know

my organizational approach is partially responsible for their intellectual growth. Instead of reaching the twentieth century and heaving sighs of relief because this means the end of the literary road for them, my students reach the twentieth century and smile (Well, some of them smile to themselves, I think!) that they can actually understand many of the nuances of modern literature.

They understand modern literature because they understand what precedes it. "Wait a minute! We've come around full circle to an argument for chronological treatment!" you say? Not at all. Because I have taken some time to introduce English literature to them in what I think is a pragmatic way, they have acquired the familiarity with it that breeds confidence. And this confidence, in turn, leads them to read more perceptively, to write more lucidly, and to think more significantly.

At the end of the year, I am usually surprised at the knowledge of specific works and different literary genres, and highlights of literary history that my students have retained--so much more than I retained some years ago after an old-fashioned English literature course in my high school. And all of this is accomplished without pressing Beowulf into battle yet one more time.

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Sequence of English Literature in "College English"

FIRST SEMESTER

Eliot, George. Silas Marner

Dickens, Charles. Great Expectations

Brontë, Emily. Wuthering Heights

Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice

"A Collection of English Essays"

I. Three Essays of Wit

Bacon, Francis. "Of Studies"  
Addison, Joseph. "Tom Folio"

II. Three Essays on Writing

Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language"  
Maugham, W. Somerset. "Causes of Obscurity in Writing"  
Orwell, George. "Why I Write"

III. Two Essays of Literary Appreciation

Dryden, John. from "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy"  
Johnson, Samuel. from "Preface to Shakespeare"

IV. Two Companion Essays on Education, Literature, and Science

Huxley, Thomas Henry. from "Science and Culture"  
Arnold, Matthew. from "Literature and Science"

SECOND SEMESTER

"A Collection of British Poetry"

I. The Medieval Period

Chaucer, Geoffrey. from The Canterbury Tales: "The General Prologue,"  
"The Pardoner's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale"

II. Love Poems of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Spenser, Edmund. from Amoretti: "Sonnet 54"  
"Sonnet 67"  
"Sonnet 75"

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 18"  
"Sonnet 29"  
"Sonnet 116"

Wyatt, Thomas. "They Flee from Me"

Donne, John. "The Sun Rising"

Herrick, Robert. "Upon Love, by Way of Question and Answer"

III. The Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries

Donne, John. from Holy Sonnets: #10  
Herbert, George. "Vanity (I)"  
                                  "The Pulley"  
Milton, John. "L'Allegro"  
                                  "Il Penseroso"  
Dryden, John. "Alexander's Feast"  
Pope, Alexander. from An Essay on Man

Wilde, Oscar. The Importance of Being Earnest

"A Collection of British Poetry"

IV. The Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Gray, Thomas. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"  
Blake, William. from Songs of Innocence: "The Lamb"  
                                                                                  "Holy Thursday (I)"  
                                  from Songs of Experience: "Holy Thursday (II)"  
                                                                                  "The Tyger"  
                                                                                  "A Poison Tree"

Burns, Robert. "To a Mouse"  
                                  "To a Louse"  
Wordsworth, William. "My Heart Leaps Up"  
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Kubla Khan"  
Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet

Stoppard, Tom. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

"A Collection of British Poetry"

V. The Late Nineteenth Century

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. "Morte d'Arthur"  
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. "How Do I Love Thee?"  
Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess"  
Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach"  
                                  "The Buried Life"  
Hardy, Thomas. "Nature's Questioning"  
                                  "A Broken Appointment"  
Hopkins, Gerald Manley. ("No Worst, There Is None. Pitched  
                                                                                  Past Pitch of Grief.")  
Housman, A. E. "To An Athlete Dying Young"

Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness

"A Collection of British Poetry"

VI. The Twentieth Century

Lawrence, D. H. "Piano"  
                                  "Snake"  
Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"  
Auden, W. H. "Musée des Beaux Arts"  
                                  "Law Like Love"  
Thomas, Dylan. "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"  
                                  "And Death Shall Have No Dominion"

James, Henry. The Turn of the Screw

OR

Orwell, George. 1984